

Called to Care for Creation

An Earth Day Message by Rev. Marty Toepke-Floyd

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vk-dbkXxjIk> (sermon begins at 34:00)

Genesis 6:5-8, 7:1-4, 9:12-15

Creation Care

April 21st, 2024

In the 1890s, one hundred European starlings were released in New York City's Central Park so that all the birds in Shake-speare's works could be observed there. It required no permits or environmental impact assessment, but I wish it had. Over the past 130 years, starling flocks have spread across North America. An estimated 200 million of these dark bluish-brownish, black birds are now permanent residents of Canada, parts of Alaska and all of the lower 48 states, out competing native many North American birds for food and habitat. How did that initial shipment of European birds arrive on these shores? By boat across the Atlantic Ocean.

(Prairie Public Radio
Natural North Dakota 01/20/24)

The story goes that ravens and doves also traveled over deep waters on Noah's Ark before they were let loose upon new land. When the flood waters finally receded, Noah released a raven, known to be a very intelligent and resourceful bird, but it didn't return. Then Noah sent out a dove, which after awhile returned with an olive branch in its beak, a sure sign that dry land was re-appearing and that trees had survived the deluge, so it was safe to disembark and start life on earth over again.

Because of all the animals, Noah's Ark is a favorite of children, and it is presented like a G-rated story, but the unvarnished version in Genesis should carry a R-rating for "disturbing and violent content." Though it has a happy ending with the rainbow arcing over frolicking animals, it opens this way:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humans was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humans on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the humans I have created — people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air — for I am sorry that I have made them."

The animals aren't to blame for the evil running amuck in the world, yet they quickly become collateral damage caught up in the destruction of the irredeemable humans, just as tens of thousands of women and men, children and infants in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan ... have lost their lives, homes and businesses, when warring factions try to eradicate their sworn enemies. The Biblical account doesn't go into gory details of the drowning of animals and people, but that would not be a pretty picture, would it?

There is of course one human and his extended family, along with lots of pairs of animals, who escape the global catastrophe as told in Genesis. Noah is deemed righteous, so he and his spouse, and their three sons and daughters-in-law are saved. Exactly what makes Noah stand out from the wicked and condemned crowd isn't specified beyond that "he walked with God." Noah is obedient to the odd divine orders to construct a fantastically huge boat nowhere near any large body of water and to be ready to set sail. Noah & Sons Boat Builders follow the divine blueprints, round up and load up seven pairs of clean animals, and one pair each of unclean animals, so life on Earth can be saved.

This incredible story of a second creation isn't about Noah, however, but about God and God's authority and prerogative. God is the central character. God is the One who judges that "all flesh has been corrupted." God is the One who decides to blot them all out, and start afresh with a select seed stock for repopulating the world. God causes the waters above and below to pour out re-creating the deep waters of chaos from the 1st creation story. Then God stops the rain and allows the waters to recede. God hangs up his war-bow, the rainbow, in the clouds, and promises never again to flood out everyone. In this story, God judges, punishes, repents, re-creates, yet in the end, learns the sad lesson, that even a divine deluge can't permanently eliminate evil from human nature and behavior. God has to settle for making a new covenant with creation and staying in relationship with humans in hopes of changing us by some other means.

On Facebook I've seen a post that goes like this: (A picture of barren waste land with the caption) "a world without pollinators." (A picture of factories and gritty cityscape) "a world without trees or animals." (Finally a picture of a verdant and blossoming landscape) "a world without humans." Some viewers might react with a big "heart" emoji to that post, but for those who believe in the goodness of God, as well as God's ongoing engagement with the world, I think it should get a "sad face," or at best a "puzzled face." Would the world really be better off without humans?

For better or worse humans are part of this world – sharing the physical flesh of creation but also sharing in God's image – though often we forget our connection to God's good creation and deny our God-given responsibility as Earth-keepers. If things were bad in Noah's time, they certainly have gotten worse in ours! We humans have initiated what some geologists call the "Anthropocene," meaning that our technology has as great an impact on the planet as the asteroid which wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

Our rapid production of greenhouse gases such as long lasting CO₂ (carbon dioxide) and our rising releases of short acting methane CH₄ (80 times more powerful than carbon dioxide) are causing the stable climate which has been the basis of agriculture for the past 10,000 years, and thus health and wealth of humanity to become unstable with more frequent flood events and stronger storms longer lasting droughts and hotter heatwaves. The atmosphere hasn't had this much CO₂ in it, since 2 million years ago, when our ancient ancestors were first chasing wild game across the African plains!

Today, the ice sheets of Greenland and Antarctica are melting faster and faster each year, and rising sea levels are likely to drown Florida and coastal cities within the lifetime of our children and grandchildren. I haven't even mentioned war, famine, injustice, waste and pollution, which our modern wickedness, greed, lust and hatred have unleashed upon all life on earth, causing populations of birds, wild animals, and fish into steep decline in just the past few decades. Where's an ark to save the animals when you need one?

Lest everyone rush off in despair to a private island, underground bunker or a distant planet, we humans have a critical role to play in restoring this world. We can give a helping hand to nature. If you haven't yet read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, I highly recommend that you do. She is a mother, a biologist and a Native American connected to her people's traditions and respect for creation. Native peoples have managed forests and fields, lakes & streams on this continent for thousands of years in sustainable ways. Robin's basic message is that indigenous values and perspectives are essential to restore the land, which in turn will restore us.

Contrary to the assertion that says the planet would be better off without us, indigenous history and traditions, as well as God through the pages of the Bible, tell us that **we humans are called to care for creation**. When we study and listen to the forests, fields, seas and skies, we can learn to live in harmony with respect, humility and gratitude in our hearts.

Sixty years ago, our national symbol, the bald eagle was facing extinction. The petro-chemical, DDT, widely used to control insect pests, was causing the eggshells of raptors like bald eagles to thin out, so that the weight of the adult birds incubating eggs crushed them. When we changed our ways, and banned DDT production and usage, it gave eagles a chance to recover, they are now numerous and no longer listed as endangered. Whooping cranes, California condors, American bison and black-footed ferrets to name a few, are other species which have come back from the brink of extinction, because we humans have intervened to save them.

True, other animals are still in decline and need to be listed and protected. Tropical and temperate forests are still being clearcut. Fish and sharks are being over caught in the oceans. Habitats are being polluted with plastics. Yet we can act to stop the destruction and restore nature's balance. We can help create a future which want to live in.

It is possible to protect existing wild habitats, old growth forests, and threatened species and restore natural habitats and endangered animals. It's not just possible, it's part of our mission as the Church, as believers in a God who loves us and all creation. People of faith as well as others have and are acting to

restore the lands & waters. We have and are planting trees and returning native plants & animals. We have and are setting aside land for parks and reserves. More needs to be done by individuals, governments, and corporations, but it is possible to change our ways, and give nature room to work its restorative and resilient powers.

We humans are unique in God's creation. We are the only creatures we are aware of who can express praise to God for the complexity of life on earth and the wonder of the universe beyond. Like Noah, we have the ability to cooperate with God to restore God's good gift of life on this planet. Like the Ark, we can save other creatures from the threat of extinction if we make the effort now to change direction, curb our consumption and handle waste products better.

In the vastness of our solar system and outer space, we know that only this one planet, Earth, can support and sustain life. So we must embrace our calling to care better for our home because it's God's crown jewel in Creation. God has endowed nature with the resilient power to heal itself to regrow forests that were cut down, to reproduce endangered species, to reclaim waste lands from pollution and erosion. We only need to embrace our calling and be obedient to God's command to care for this wonderful and unique Garden of Life. Our reward is the joy of living here and now and giving hope to future generations.

Let us pray this Litany Prayer ...

(Candlelight Litany for Creation – Earth Day Vigil – 2024 General Conference by Dr. Dan Joranko, Virginia Annual Conference)

Background Resources:

Adult Bible Studies Summer 99, Fall 04, Fall 06, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer
Genesis: A Living Conversation by Bill Moyers